

ANDROCLES & THE LIBRARIAN

*Her last day after forty years of service.
It should have been different or special in some way.
But no one seemed to have remembered.*

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Illustration by Mia Carpenter

This short story appeared in REDBOOK (about 1966 or perhaps earlier) and the local author is supposed to have used EFML Stillman Taylor + Miss Bungard for the background & characters. It should be saved with EFML history as it gives a vivid picture of the EFML library in the years of 1950's + early 1960's. It undoubtedly drew a great deal of characterization from the librarians of that time.

Sent to Jane Cowen
for VCPL files
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Libraries (T.H.) - VCPL

Community Affairs File

Vigo County Public Library

REFERENCE

DO NOT CIRCULATE

Miss Osborne woke before the alarm went off. She was immediately alert—a diurnal type—sensing the importance of this her last working day. She turned back the quilt cover, sat up in bed, and touched her old toes five times. *Not bad for an arthritic*, she thought. Being thin helped. The bed-springs creaked as she got up. She had slept naked all her life, and no one knew it.

She put on a robe and tiptoed down the white-carpeted hallway, past Papa's door. (When a man is 93 and has been bedfast for more than 20 years, you try not to disturb him mornings.) Papa was cross, but Miss Osborne found it easy to forgive him because of the pain.

She hobbled downstairs, favoring her left knee, and put the coffee on. Through the kitchen window, the city park across the street shimmered green and golden in the April light. Robin Hood, Friar Tuck, and Maid Marian dwelled among the sheltering leaves of the trees, but Miss Osborne never revealed their secret. She had pricked her thumb and sworn it in blood. Her lips were sealed.

While the coffee perked, she washed her face and brushed her long hair, which was still faintly rosy. She knew that some of the students who came into the Stilesville Public Library said she dyed it, while others insisted nobody would choose that color. Miss Osborne ignored their half-hidden smiles (they had pain, too—growing pains) and went right on spending ten minutes every morning brushing, braiding, and winding it into the towering beehive she had worn before, during, and after that coiffure was in fashion. It was handy for storing pencils. Once, during World War II she had secreted a coded message there. On

microfilm. A dangerous ploy, but the prime minister had been grateful. Then there was that memorable night when she had been locked in the tower and would have perished at the hands of the cruel king, but she was able to let down the strong red braids of her hair so that her lover, who had swum the moat, could climb to her rescue with food, water, and the key to the castle. Faint with hunger, she had fallen on the grapes and pomegranates and the long French bread (she wondered how he managed the loaf in the moat), remembering to kiss him only later.

The back door clicked open. Picola (rhymes with Victrola) eased her smiling brown bulk into the kitchen and shrugged out of the yellow slicker she wore in fair weather or foul.

"You up early," Picola observed, hanging her coat on a hook in the stairwell.

"My last day."

Black-velvet eyes searched her face. "You sad?"

"A little." Miss Osborne nursed a chilly feeling that the cold waters of retirement would close over her head leaving no bubble. She shivered. Forty years of service ought to leave a mark somewhere, she brooded, watching Picola's skilled hands setting the tray for Papa. *She isn't real*, Miss Osborne thought. She materializes every morning in fumes from an ammonia bottle—a substantial genie with no schooling, possessed of a sure knowledge of the esoteric art of where to apply and where to withhold the coal oil. Picola's pain is passion: she's had five husbands—there's an education!—and a houseful of children, with no apparent effort. Would "consorts" be a better word for Picola's men? Miss Osborne

sighed. *I haven't had one—man, husband, nor consort.* She smiled. *I remembered to kiss them too late.*

Miss Osborne went upstairs and dressed in silence, putting on the familiar gray knit and sensible oxfords. *Let's not be ostentatious,* she told herself. *No one else is making a fuss. Certainly not Winfield Burdick, who will be quite happy when I'm gone.*

That ambitious young librarian had been a thorn in Miss Osborne's side ever since he had been brought in over her head by the board of trustees four years ago to run the library—a position she merited but couldn't hold on account of the recent ruling about degrees.

Just because he's a man, she thought, her lips tight. Miss Osborne had gone straight from high school into a Carnegie library, where she served as an apprentice. (Her dream had been to work on a newspaper, but Papa—this was 1916—Papa had put his foot down, declaring the Bohemian world of journalism, by God, no place for the daughter of a decent man.) Winfield Burdick's degree was in audio-visual education, of all things, and his dream was to run a "popular" library—record concerts, films, hobby shows, bookmobiles, civic meetings! Miss Osborne was convinced that Mr. Bee—that's how she saw Winfield Burdick, a round little fellow, humming to himself, buzzing here, buzzing there, glassy-eyed behind his contact lenses—she was convinced that Mr. Bee would install a belly dancer if he thought it would create traffic in the library.

Miss Osborne walked the block and a half to the bus stop, careful not to step on any cracks. On the way there she made a wish.

She closed her eyes and stood quite still on the street corner. She wished the library were the way she remembered it—like a beautiful woman, a goddess, a classic Greek temple with fluted columns rising majestically, the portico guarded by a brass lion whose tail was worn shiny from being twisted. (Miss Osborne knew for a fact that Androcles preferred to have his ears rubbed.) There used to be glowing red mahogany tables and chairs in the reading room under the stained-glass dome. The lights were shaded with green glass, and the golden oak floors were warm underfoot. There was a Constable landscape, a Della Robbia bas-relief, books with real leather bindings lettered in gold.

Now there was a cold linoleum-tile floor, abstract art, blond furniture, and fluorescent bulbs casting a bilious glare over the paperbacks, the microfilm, and the digests. A bastard world, Miss Osborne thought—and she was old enough to remember when bastard was good English usage and not a dirty word.

The Constable painting had been exiled to the dungeon of a basement, its face to the storeroom wall. Miss Osborne had gone down to look for the picture last month, and found it gone. They were always ripping and hammering and moving things away. Miss Osborne never knew whether the reference desk would be on her right or on her left when she went in in the morning. It got so it wasn't safe to leave your chair—it would be gone when you came back.

Last week, there had been an uproar behind a huge tarpaulin stretched outside one of the assembly rooms where the poets' club (a group of dowdy housewives who refreshed themselves by dusting the stars for

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Her eyes narrowed. The space capsule was nearing the rendezvous. The Van Allen belt was behind her now. She was on manual, having corrected the yaw, and in visual contact with the other spacecraft. She had calculated her orbit to perfection. She smiled, remembering how reluctant they had been to let a woman go. Suddenly, her audio failed. She lost contact with Space Central. The lights on her fingertips went out. There was a hideous red flash in the dark—a smell of sulphur—and smoke filled the capsule. She felt herself blacking out. Through a sheer effort of will, she forced herself to yank the ejection cord. Fainting, Miss Osborne fell free, floating in space. After an interval, the yellow silk chute ballooned out, as beautiful and protective as a slicker in the rain.

She blinked. That rhythmic ticking—thwick-thwack, thwick-thwack—the bus driver had turned on his windshield wipers. *Wouldn't you know it would rain on my last day?* she thought.

The bus stopped directly in front of the library. Miss Osborne's left knee almost balked at the long flight of stone steps. She managed the first half by grasping the railing and pulling herself along until she gained the wide landing and stopped there to rest.

Androcles gave her a brass smile. She rubbed his ear. He almost purred. "You look pale," the lion said.

"I've been to the moon and back this morning."

He understood. "It's a tiresome trip." "This is my last day, Androcles. Forty years—written on the wind."

"Don't talk clichés. It doesn't become you." He turned his other ear. "You've left an imprint on many a mind. Ross Lockworth, for instance. He'd never have written that best seller without you."

"Ross doesn't remember. He didn't even dedicate it to me."

"I recall that when you read it you were glad," Androcles reminded her.

"True. Ross fell short of his talent."

The lion nodded. "The movie was so bad my cousin Leo went around for days with his tail between his legs."

"Ross will write something good," she insisted. "He's rich now—he can afford to. And he's young—he has time. I saw him on television the other evening. He's back from Europe—wearing a moustache."

A fat policeman in a shiny black raincoat with a shelf across the back strolled by the library. He frowned up at Miss Osborne, leaning against the wet brass lion talking to herself. "Are you all right?" he called.

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a change) met to read their rhymes aloud to one another. Miss Osborne flinched at the noise, but she was too weary to investigate. It wouldn't have surprised her to find them putting in one of those electronic computers that link, belch, shift gears, and spew out punched cards—*doing away with all of us*, she thought.

The bus nudged the curb. Miss Osborne got on and took a seat directly behind the driver. She leaned forward. With fresh horses they might reach the castle in time to save the queen's honor.

They rode for what seemed a long time. They came to the courthouse where a plane was parked on the lawn. Miss Osborne sized up the situation in a glance. City Hall was surrounded, the mayor held captive. She studied the line of enemy trucks moving along Fourth Street. The camouflage was clever, but she guessed their plan. They had secured the bridge. Headquarters must be alerted. Communications had been cut, but one brave woman might get through. Miss Osborne squared her shoulders. *If caught, I'll swallow the capsule.*



She nodded. The man shook his head and walked away.

"He thinks I'm eccentric," she whispered. "He probably goes home and tells his wife you see what comes of educating a woman."

Androcles nuzzled against her. "Ignorance gives me a pain."

"Don't growl." She rubbed his ear. "Some folks frown on anthropomorphism."

In the distance, the courthouse chimes bonged nine. Miss Osborne gave him a parting hug. He licked her hand and said, "Your slip is showing."

It seemed an odd thing for a lion to say.

It was an odd day all the way round. Miss Osborne had thought—hoped—it might be different in some way. Wouldn't you think somebody would offer congratulations or ask what are your plans? Nobody did. *Now I know what they mean by a whimper instead of a bang*, she brooded.

Mr. Bee wasn't even in. She frowned. *Just like him to avoid me on my last day.* Mr. Bee was unsure of himself—baffled that in spite of his many-splendored innovations, Miss Osborne's story hour remained the most popular feature in the library.

The Circulation girls looked up from their stamp pads, spoke, and averted their eyes. Even the hammers behind the tarpaulin were stilled. In the silence, Miss Osborne leafed through the mail on her desk—two postcards—but as she sat down to read them, a stack of letters mushroomed in front of her. She opened them one at a time, savoring the contents. She had come into a sizable fortune from a distant relative who had passed away in China. The President wondered if she would care to head the newly authorized Department of Culture, holding the rank of cabinet member. A wire from Sweden: "The Nobel Prize Committee is happy to inform you . . ." A heavy wax seal on the next one. Would she be available to tutor the royal children of Monaco?

At noon, everyone seemed to have a luncheon date. Miss Osborne extracted a limp sandwich and a cup of weak coffee from the coin-operated canteen, eating alone in the basement staff room. The food stuck in her throat. She swallowed hard. *I might as well have stayed home*, she brooded. But Androcles would have worried. (He was capable of padding out to her house to see what was wrong. Robin Hood might fail to recognize him, and shoot him, and then there'd be hell to pay. It isn't safe for a lion in the streets anymore.)

For two cents, I'd go home right now, she thought. If it weren't for the story hour this afternoon —

Winfield Burdick put his round crew cut in the doorway. He peered at his wrist-watch. Miss Osborne bit her lip. *If he tells me I'm taking too much time for lunch, I'll—I'll . . .* She had a horrible feeling that she might burst into tears.

"Er—Miss Osborne," he said, "I'm wondering if you would come upstairs."

She blinked, waiting.

"It's—important." She didn't move. He took her by both elbows and lifted her up, his voice suddenly gentle. "We have a surprise for you."

Ross Lockworth met them at the head of the stairs. Miss Osborne gasped. He smelled of tweed and tobacco, and she felt the brush of his moustache as he kissed her hand. *He learned that in Europe*, she thought.

"Congratulations, Miss Osborne," Ross said. "I'm happy to be a part of this ceremony in your honor."

The Circulation girls exchanged glances—this was no daydream—and Miss Osborne understood why everyone had been withdrawn this morning. They had been keeping this secret. She smiled at the story-hour

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children gathered in a circle. On a wave of warmth and laughter, everyone swept her back to the room where the big tarpaulin hung. Ross stepped forward and pulled a cord, revealing the heavy door bearing a new mahogany plaque lettered in gold. He made a graceful little dedication speech while Miss Osborne stared at the sign: THE OSBORNE ROOM.

It blurred.

Mr. Bee was buzzing now. He ushered her into the new room with the green-shaded lights glowing like emeralds above the mahogany tables and chairs. The books were

there, shelf after shelf, heavy volumes bound in real leather with gold tooling—and the Della Robbia bas-relief. . . .

Miss Osborne blinked at these treasures. "The Constable?" She couldn't help asking.

Four little girls came forward, carrying it by the corners, face up, like a tray. The painting had been restored and handsomely framed in gold. They curtsied and presented it to her as the library's parting gift.

Miss Osborne leaned against Androcles in the sunshine, waiting for Ross Lockworth to bring his car around to drive her home.

"You look sad," the lion said to her.

"I am," she said, and rubbed his ear. "You made a wish, and it came true. I thought you would be pleased."

"I didn't deserve it."

"You earned it. If we got what we deserve we'd all have less."

"You're goodhearted, Androcles."

"I'm lionhearted."

"Mamma used to tell me I knew all about books and nothing about people. I guess that's why I created a world of my own."

He licked her hand. "I'm glad we met."

"It was nice of Mr. Bee to go ahead with it in spite of the way he felt."

"That's life—going ahead in spite of the way you feel," the lion said.

They smiled at each other. "I'm going to miss you, Androcles."

"Oh, I'm coming with you." He leaped down from his pedestal, as graceful as a cat. The sun glinted on his brass eyelashes. Was it a trick of the light—or did he wink? Miss Osborne never knew. She lifted her head (feeling no pain) and walked down the steps of the library and into the jungle, the king of beasts at her side. The birds suddenly were silenced. Tribal chieftains, lurking behind the greenery, dropped their feathered spears and crept forward—one by one—gazing in awe at the tawny lion and the beautiful white goddess.

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